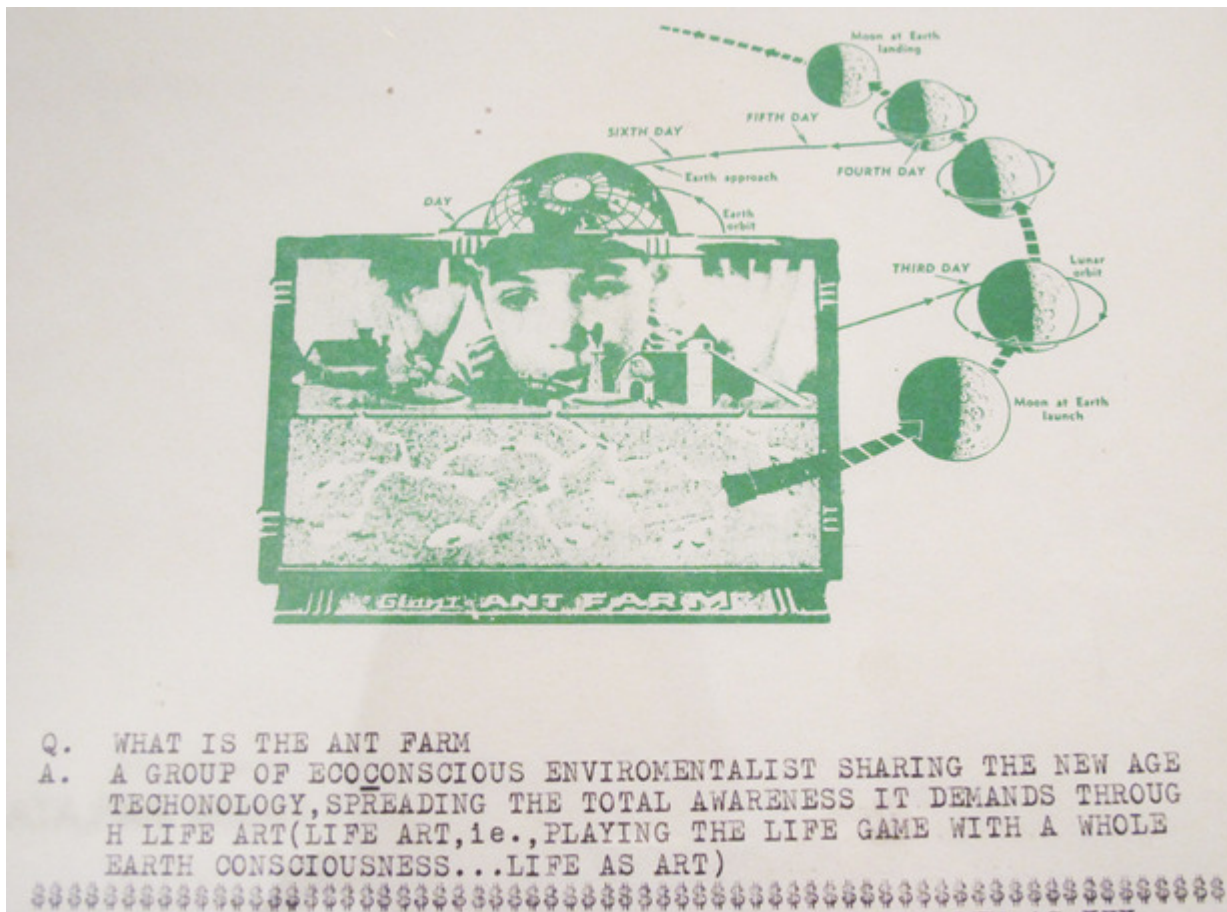


TECHNOLOGY

Proto YouTube: How 1970s Video Collectives Anticipated Our Strange Internet

ALEXIS C. MADRIGAL NOVEMBER 29, 2011



It goes like this: a technological innovation opens up the possibility for a new kind of more immediate, decentralized, less hierarchical media form. The people will be empowered! And sometimes, they are. (At least for a while.)

This is the dominant narrative of the Internet as communications medium. But what's fascinating is that if we look in the crevasses of history, we can find a set of people who were blazing the trail that social media advocates would later walk. The new technology that arrived in their midst was the videocamera, and their approach was flavored by the countercultural milieu in which they placed themselves.

Throughout the 1970s, video collectives like the one I'll focus on in this essay, Ant

Farm, tried to break the three-channel tyranny of the broadcast media long before computer networks were commonly used.

According to scholar Deanne Pytlinski, these groups wanted to "interrupt broadcast television's one-way flow of information." They created video with "the goal of liberating the mind from control by the mainstream media through decentralization... coupled with the desire for deeper and more authentic forms of interpersonal communication."

Unlike film, which had to be developed and was expensive, video could be fast, cheap, and on-the-go. This change allowed video collectives to experiment with new ways of producing *and* consuming moving pictures.

Their work is detailed in Pytlinski's essay, which appears in a new book edited by Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner, *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977*, and in objects from Ant Farm productions at an accompanying show at the Denver Museum of Contemporary Art. The counterculture influenced the videomakers, who influenced more than just the counterculture. Their creative use of the new technology allowed new ways to think about media to spring up. Along with magazines like *The Whole Earth Catalog*, they promoted a pro-technology, anti-mainstream-media sensibility that was a far cry from neo-primitivism and much closer to the Internet pioneers of the 1990s.

While historian Fred Turner has described how the counterculture became cyberculture, the role of video collectives in creating new modes of networked media creation has gone unremarked upon. The collectives -- especially San Francisco's Ant Farm, Media Access Center, Optic Nerve, Video Free America, and TVTV -- were new media makers before there was a name for such a thing. But without networked distribution, they were forced to create fantastically creative spectacle and sneakernets to get their message out.

I am 65 percent not kidding when I say that the social-media ecosystem is basically the Ant Farm plus the Internet.

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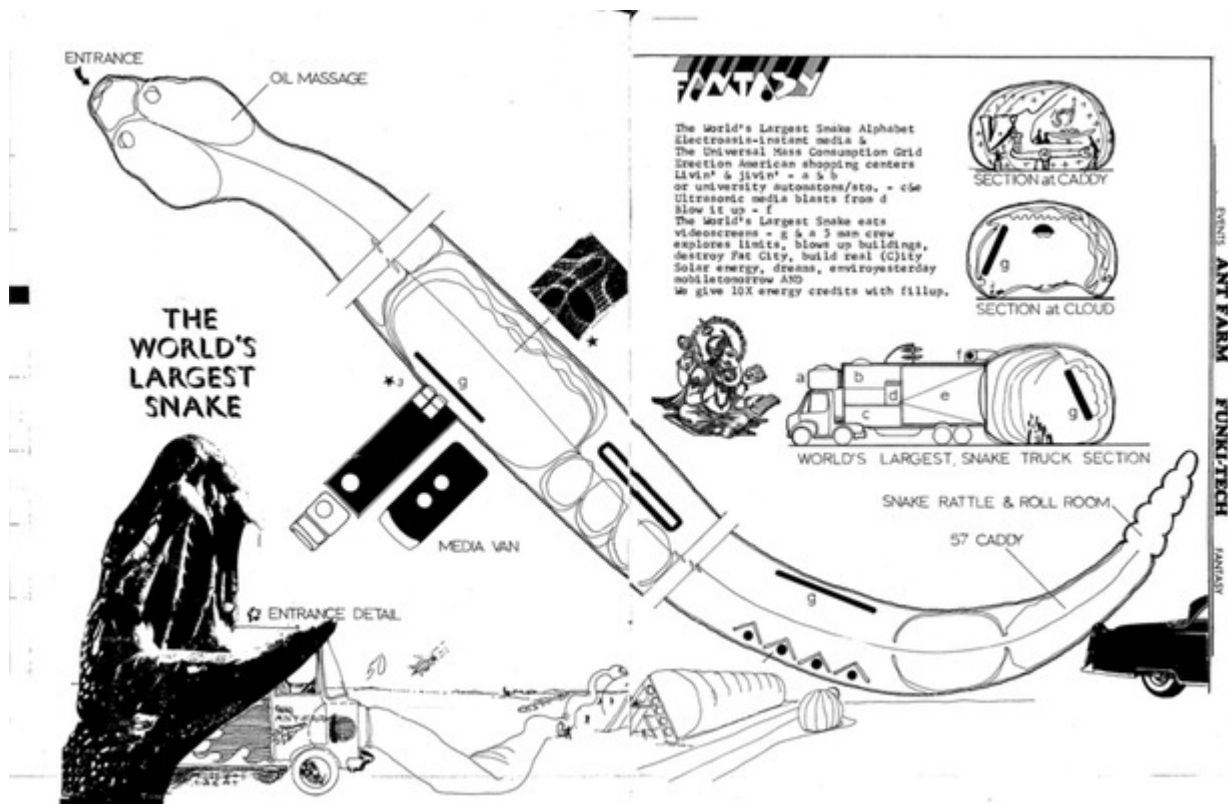
On July 4, 1975, the members of San Francisco's Ant Farm architecture and video collective staged what they called the "ultimate media event." After a bit of performance-art frivolity in which a John F. Kennedy impersonator gave a mock speech deriding the media -- "Who can deny that we are a nation addicted to television and the constant flow of media? Haven't you ever wanted to put your foot through your television?" -- the group took a heavily modded Cadillac and crashed it through a thin pyramid of television sets.

Local broadcast-television stations covered the event, mostly to mock it. KPIX, the CBS affiliate, cut back from its segment to the studio's two male anchors. "Now *that* was weird," one says, gesticulating with his pen. "You've got to say that that was pretty weird. The car going into the television sets and the Kennedy impersonator." He shakes his head as his colleague says, "I think it's over our heads."

In footage from that time, KTVU's man on the scene looks into the camera with a clump of televisions flaming behind him and says, "So, what's it all mean? Well, presumably, the message is for the media," he says. "Get it?" The message is obvious to him, but the anchors back in the studio react differently. "I don't think I want to get it," says one anchor. "That's from the culture corner tonight," another anchor says as the third uncomfortably adjusts his jacket. The point, of course, was that

broadcast television should burn! Even the faux bewilderment of the anchors shows them to be doltish squares because, really, who couldn't see what the message was? The brilliance of the stunt was to exploit the networks lust for spectacle to get them to broadcast the call for their own demise.

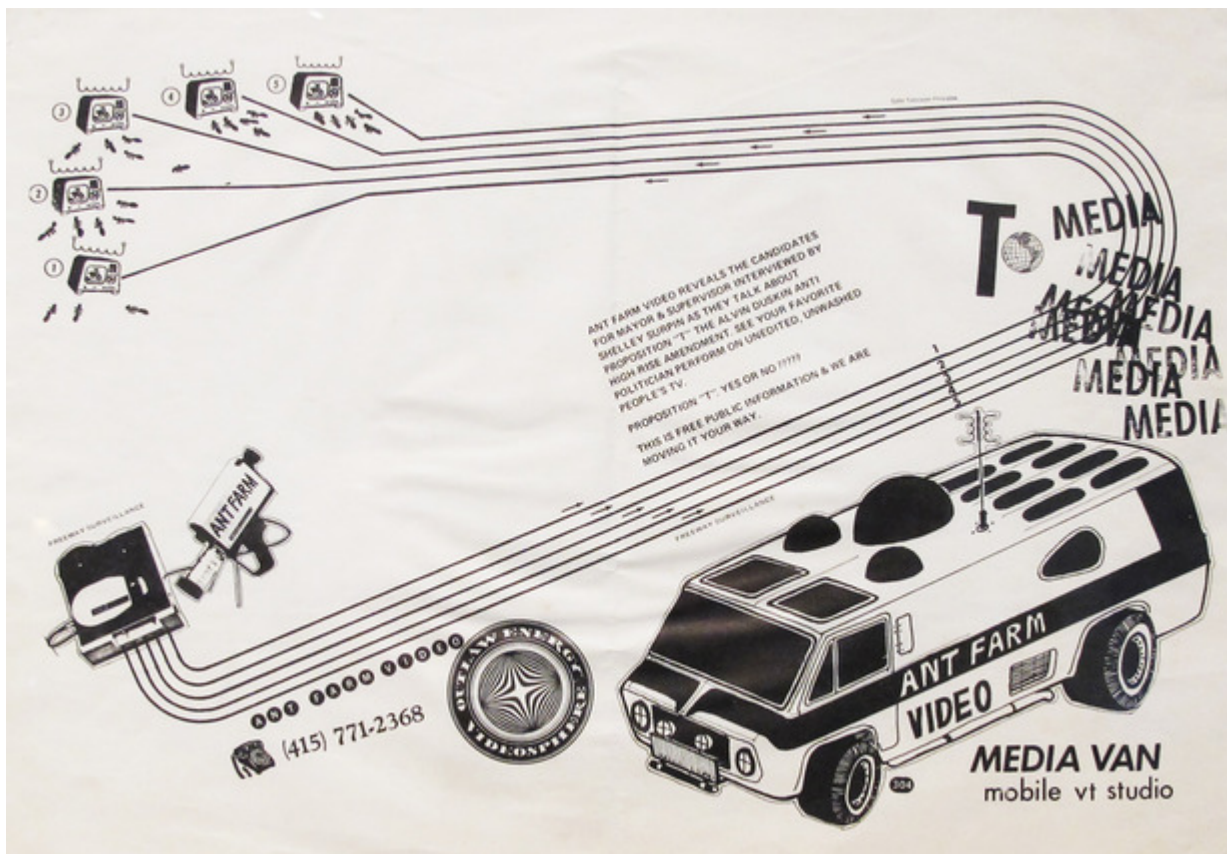
We know all about this stunt because The Ant Farm preserved it in a video piece called, Media Burn, which is now available for free on the art site UbuWeb. While they decried the artifacts and means of consuming moving pictures, they were simultaneously using the new technology of the videocamera to create counterprogramming. While contemporary people of all political persuasions like to paint the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s as a neo-primitivist affair, Ant Farm and the rest of the collectives were nothing of the sort. In fact, they were using the latest technology, a technology considerably newer than film cameras, and they were obsessed with cybernetics, an emergent framework for thinking about systems that emerged out of World War II war research. It is easier to paint all counterculturalists as reactionary anti-technologists, but the facts don't match up with the charge.



Ant Farm's fascination with technology went beyond video art. They were obsessed with inflatable buildings (!) because of their mutability, speed of deployment, and

low-cost. As they describe in their "Inflatocookbook," a DIY guide to inflatable architecture, they could show up somewhere and create a building within hours with some plastic, tape, and "used fans from Goodwill." They were not against technology but merely optimizing for a different set of properties. The mobility of the buildings was especially important because the Ant Farm's desire for a networked world in which high-bandwidth communication was only possible face-to-face meant that they had to spend a lot of time physically traveling the country.

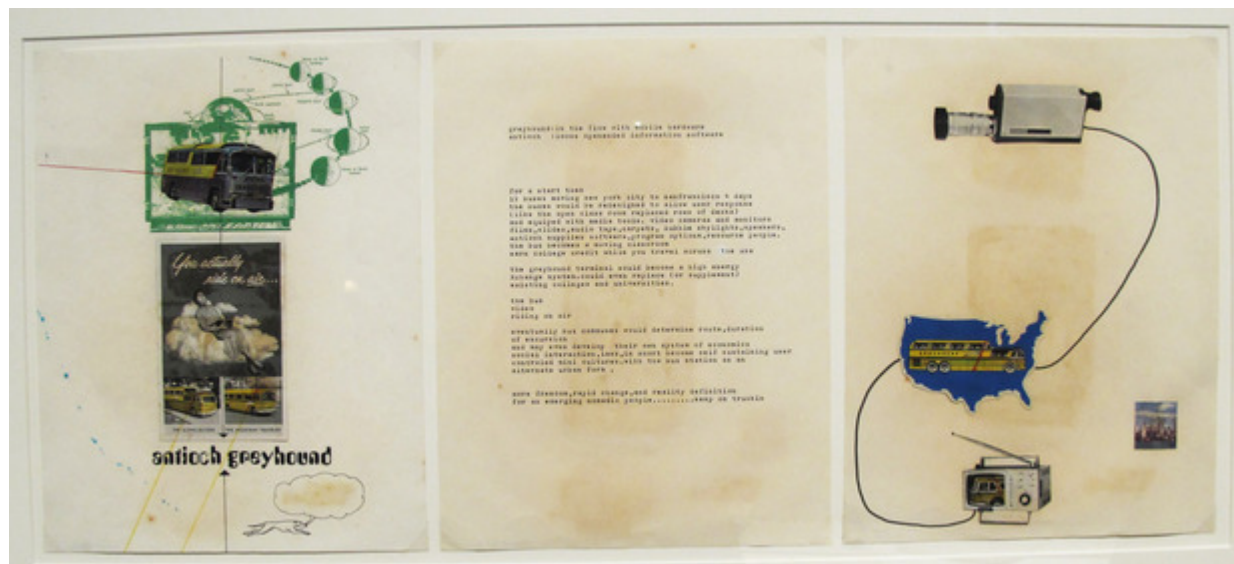
They did this traveling in considerable style. The group outfitted a van to enable the creation and display of video. As you can see in the print below, the purpose of the van was to allow them to show "unedited, unwashed people's TV" of political candidates debating things. We're so used to seeing politicians on YouTube and in other venues, that it's easy to forget how difficult it would have been to see politicians speeches in their unedited forms. Broadcast television networks had incredible control over how a particular politician would be presented. The Ant Farm Video Van wanted to end that, at least for people who wanted more viewpoints.



The design of the poster is worth considering, too. I especially like the media stamps as the information rounds the bend. The self-conception of the media that was popular in the 1970s was a neutral arbiter of facts. They simply took in information, dug for context, and presented all the news that was fit to print. Ant Farm took this conception of media as pure conduit through which all truth flowed and exploded it. The media, here, is not the information itself, but rather a swarm of parasitic entities feeding on the movement of information. And they include themselves in that critique.

What's astounding is that the Ant Farm people actually got ideas like this off of the drawing board and onto the road. Their dedication to doing is one of their hallmarks. Below, you can glimpse slides of some of their adventures across the country in the media van. What I find fascinating about these trips is that they show just how much informational friction really existed. The Ant Farm had to imagine a "truck stop network" that would allow people retain some sense of community while remaining on the move to learn and gather new information. They even imagined college classes at Antioch being taught on a Greyhound bus. Given the nature (and business model) of broadcast media at the time and the lack of an Internet, you had to go to where the information was. The frontiers of knowledge were oddly physical.

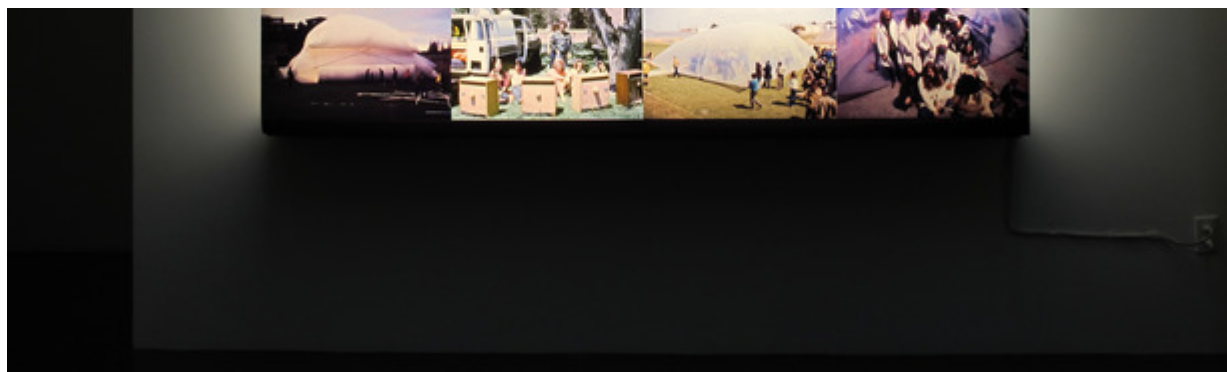
"Mobility was often discussed throughout the video literature as characteristic of alternative media, and it was positioned in opposition to the stasis of bourgeois life and broadcast news," wrote the video collective scholar Pytlinski.



If you wanted to get access non-mainstream knowledge (say, scientific protocols or ecological building techniques), you had to *really work*. I know, in the post-Internet world, this sounds obvious to the point of stupidity, but that's exactly why we need to remember what the information ecosystem used to be like. We've never had it so good, when it comes to encountering the unconventional. Perhaps the biggest change is that human brains are not the ones primarily responsible for the organization of information. Because Google can index all the words in a document, a person doesn't have to do so, relying on heuristics and hierarchies and keywords. With full-text search combined with ultra low cost and fast (inflatable?) publishing, anyone can find anything. The Media Van does not have to come to you. Because the Media Van is everywhere.

Meanwhile, video has proven to be transformative for exactly the reasons that the collectives anticipated: decentralization and speed of both production and consumption. Both factors allow for immediate, democratic feedback. This clarifies one lesson I've taken from Occupy Wall Street: video's catalytic power is proportional to its proximity to an event. Are the cops coming? Turn on the livestream. Did you get pepper sprayed? To the YouTube! When these things happen fast enough, they can alter the course of a protest *as it's happening*. There might not be a direct line running from the physical ad hoc communities that Ant Farm created with their van to the digital ad hoc communities that center around the various occupations, but reading them against each other tells us more about both.





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